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STATE FOR WHA/CAR, INL FOR KEVIN BROWN

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: CONGRESSMAN MEEK MEETING WITH PRESIDENT PREVAL

11. This message is sensitive but unclassified -- please protect accordingly.

12. (SBU) Summary: Congressman Kendrick Meek (D-FL) discussed with President Preval April 21 the U.S. government's commitment to Haiti's development and his commitment to advocate for HOPE II legislation. Preval described Haiti's most important issues as fighting drug trafficking, acquiring Temporary Protective Status (TPS) and passing Haitian Hemispheric Opportunity through Partnership Encouragement II Act legislation (HOPE II). Preval explained the recent civil commotion in Haiti fueled by the rising cost of living and stated that criminal elements were behind the demonstrations that caused violence. Preval stated that the rising cost of food has caused demonstrations around the globe. He held out increased production of food in Haiti as the solution to rising food prices here, which he said would also create jobs. End Summary.

13. (U) Congressman Meek met with President Preval accompanied by the Ambassador, Congressional Staffer Shirlee Lafleur, and Embassy Control Officer Young (note taker). President Preval was accompanied by his advisors Gabriel Verret and Paul Denis and HOPE-CMO Executive Director Georges Sassine.

14. (SBU) The Congressmen opened the meeting by encouraging President Preval to continue to push for progress in Haiti. The President laid out the most pressing issues in Haiti, beginning with the fight against drug smuggling. Criminal drug elements took advantage of legitimate demonstrations against the rising cost of living two weeks ago and turned them violent. He stressed that even though the Government of Haiti (GoH) will hold senatorial elections, there will not be peace if the drug smuggling issue remained unresolved. He stated that Haiti must fight against powerful drug cartels use of Haiti as a transit country for drugs from South America. Haiti needs USG assistance in countering drug smuggling and asked specifically what the U.S. Congress could do to advance the country's fight.

15. (SBU) The President's second priority was the desire to obtain Temporary Protected Status (TPS) for Haitian victims of natural disasters such as hurricanes. Preval said that he was more afraid of the damage from a hurricane than that from demonstrators. Demonstrators could be managed but not hurricanes.

16. (U) President Preval's final issue was the passage of HOPE II legislation. He declared that the extension of the HOPE trade bill could create jobs and increase purchasing power in the midst of rising food prices.

17. (SBU) The President presented increased domestic agricultural production as the solution to easing the harsh impact of rising food prices on the masses. Fertilizer and the mechanization of the agriculture industry are necessary to secure long-term agricultural

production in Haiti. He hoped the international community (U.S., Canada, World Bank and IDB) would help with subsidies to reduce the prices of basic food items, notably rice, for six months. Rice is the main staple for Haitians and an important symbol. President Preval noted Haitians consume 30,000 tons of rice, 2,000 tons of wheat and 7,000 tons of cooking oil per month. In a span of three weeks, the price of rice per ton increased from 600 USD to over 1000 USD. The President asked whether the USG could subsidize U.S. producers to allow sale of rice to Haitian importers at 600 USD per ton (the sale price as of two months ago). President Preval also stated that he would work with the Haitian private sector to meet the immediate food needs of the people. Preval rejected removing taxes on basic food items, as it will take away the ability of the GoH to support itself. He said the solution is to find assistance "outside" of the GoH's budget in order to come through a difficult time.

¶18. (SBU) Preval shared the outcome of Secretary of State for Agriculture Joanas Gue's recent return from Venezuela. Gue traveled there to negotiate the purchase of 10,000 tons of urea (used in fertilizer) for one year. The GoH intended to purchase the urea but the President said that Venezuela decided to donate it. The first shipment was expected on April 22. Haiti would like to purchase fertilizer from other sources such as the U.S., Canada and Argentina.

¶19. (SBU) The President told Congressman Meek that he would convene political party leaders to obtain their agreement on selecting a new government. (Note: The Senate fired former Prime Minister Jacques-Edouard Alexis in response to his government's response to the food crisis in Haiti. End note.) He would meet with parliamentarians on April 22 to explain that the food crisis is a worldwide problem and share his food proposal to soften the blow on the Haitian economy.

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¶10. (U) Congressman Meek responded that he is "110 percent" committed to Haiti. There has been progress in Haiti but that it needed more. The food crisis is taking place around the world, including in his district in southern Florida.

¶11. (U) The Congressman told the President that one of his principal reasons for the visit was to gather more information on the need for HOPE II to be prepared to meet the challenge of passing the legislation before Congress. He suggested that Secretary Rice, Ambassador Sanderson and the President himself discuss the best time for a visit to the U.S. to personally advocate for HOPE II. Congressman Meek told President Preval he looks forward to working with Chairman of the Ways and Means Committee Congressman Charles Rangel to focus attention in Washington on HOPE II. He stated that he would spend the remainder of his time in Congress moving President Preval's agenda forward.

¶12. (SBU) The Congressman referred to his desire to bring more Washington delegations to Haiti. In response to the President's plea for stronger USG action to counter drug trafficking, Congressman Meek said he will return with the Commander of SOUTHCOM to bring more attention to the problem. Preval stressed that all projects to improve Haiti's fragile democracy will not be beneficial if the drug smuggling issue is not tackled first.

¶13. (U) Congressman Meek assured the President that he would raise his visit to Haiti with Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi and remind her of Haiti's needs, especially in regard to HOPE II. Congressman Meek told President Preval to "sound the alarm" to show the international community the urgency of the economic situation in Haiti. The Congressman closed the meeting by stating, "with crisis comes opportunity."

¶14. Congressman Meek did not have an opportunity to clear this cable prior to his departure from Port-au-Prince Monday, April 21.

SANDERSON